UNFORGETTABLE
July 10, 2005

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Psalm 13
Matthew 10:26–31
Genesis 16 and 21, selected verses

"God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.
Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand,
for I will make a great nation of him."
Genesis 21:17–18 (NRSV)

The one God, creator of diversity, commands us
to honor his creation by respecting diversity.
God, the maker of all, has set his image of the person as such,
prior to and independently of our varied cultures and civilizations,
thus conferring on human life a dignity and sanctity that transcends our differences. . . .
It is the moral basis of our shared humanity and thus of universal human rights. . . .
The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference.
Can I recognize God's image in someone who is not in my image,
whose language, faith, and ideals are different from mine?
If I cannot, then I have made God in my image
instead of allowing him to remake me in his.

Jonathan Sacks
The Dignity of Difference

We had a family funeral a few months ago. The patriarch of my wife's family died at the age of ninety-seven. We gathered in Pennsylvania from all over the country: New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Arizona, Texas, Florida, California, and Chicago. After the funeral, that evening, his family gathered. There were about fifty of us: his two sons and daughter, their spouses, their children, their children.

What we did was what everyone does at that time. We told stories. "Remember when he came home from work and . . ." "Remember the time he . . ." "Remember how he used to say . . ."

Everybody does that. Stories help us remember our ancestors, and in the telling and the remembering, our stories tell us who we are.

These summer sermons are in response to a recent *Chicago Tribune* editorial that observed that we are in danger of forgetting some of our stories—Bible stories.

People don't know the basic stories, the characters, the plots. I illustrated by telling about a call I received from a reporter after I preached a sermon during President Clinton's difficulties, a sermon that suggested that in the Bible God has a way of using morally flawed people for God's own purposes —"Like David," I said. The reporter, who had heard about the sermon, had a question: "Who was that David guy?"

In the congregation that morning two weeks ago when I told that story, there were several people who were in Chicago to attend the American Library Association annual convention. Two of them sent me copies of the Association newspaper with an AP account of the keynote speech Senator Barak Obama delivered. The article began, "'In the beginning was the word.' So begins both the Book of Genesis and Barak Obama's keynote address Saturday." Once again the press got it wrong. "In the beginning was the word" is the way the Gospel of John begins, not Genesis. The senator had it right. The reporter missed it.

And so this series of sermons based on Bible stories everybody ought to know—Noah, Abraham and Sarah. This morning it is the fascinating story of Abraham and Sarah and their son Isaac and of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave girl, and Hagar's son, Ishmael, who was also Abraham's son.

The fascinating thing about this story is how morally ambiguous it is. Abraham is known as the father of the faith to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. But he's not a very attractive figure, frankly. He's already lied and betrayed his wife by telling Pharaoh that Sarah is his sister and offering her to Pharaoh's harem to save his own skin. In his book *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, Bruce Feiler observes how art and entertainment have pretty much ignored Abraham.

> There is no Michelangelo's statue that everyone can envision, as there is of David; no indelibly outstretched fingers in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, as there are for Adam. Joseph earned an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical as well as a home video starring Donny Osmond. Moses merits a Cecil B. De Mille epic and a DreamWorks animated blockbuster. Steven Spielberg and Harrison Ford spent an entire film looking for the lost ark of the covenant. But no Abraham. (pp.69–70)

He's not a very sympathetic character here. Nor is his wife, Sarah. The sympathetic characters are the secondary characters, the outsiders, the

excluded and banished. And so you have to wonder what this story is doing in the Bible—if it is not precisely to make a point God's people have always been reluctant to understand and trust, a point precisely about "them," the "others," the "outsiders."

Abraham and Sarah, in the early second millennium BCE, have been told by God to pick up and move from their settled life and go to a land God will show them. They will begin a great nation. God will bless them—to be a blessing to every nation and to all the families of the earth. It promises to be quite an adventure. But there is a problem. They have no children, and they're getting on in age. That's a dilemma if you're supposed to be parents of a great nation.

So Sarah, ever ingenious, comes up with a suggestion. Perhaps her Egyptian slave girl could conceive and give Abraham the son he needs for the nation-building project to get started. So that is what happens. Hagar and Abraham have a son, Ishmael.

But then the unexpected happens. Sarah becomes pregnant. "God has brought laughter to me," she says. Her son is Isaac. Now the real story can continue. But what about Ishmael? It must have been a daily irritant in that household. Ishmael and Isaac, so like children, unburdened by adult issues, meanwhile become playmates. And one day, watching them playing together, the realization dawns on Sarah that Ishmael, first born, has the right to the property.

So she goes to Abraham and asks him to do something: get rid of the boy and his mother, both of them. Abraham is distressed, but he does what Sarah has asked: banishes Hagar and her baby—gives them a little water and bread, shows them the door, expels them to the wilderness, where they will both die in a few days.

When the water and bread are gone, that is what starts to happen. And in a scene of heartbreaking poignancy, her baby in her arms, dying of thirst, and unable to do anything to help him, Hagar lays him beneath a bush and walks away because she cannot bear to watch her baby die. She weeps. The child cries.

It's a terrible story. But something happens that turns it in a whole new direction. God hears that baby, crying, lying there under a bush, dying of thirst. God hears and sends an angel, who points Hagar to water and delivers a promise, another promise: "Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand for I will make a great nation of him."

Hagar and Ishmael step off the stage. Hagar takes Ishmael home to Egypt. He marries an Egyptian woman, fathers twelve tribes that came to be

associated with Bedouin tribes in the Arabian desert, and therefore is the progenitor of the Arab people and the connection to Abraham. In the Koran, instead of banishing them, Abraham escorts Hagar and Ishmael and settles them in Mecca; one of his later descendants will be the Prophet Mohammed.

There are several big and relevant ideas here. The first has to do with religious, racial, cultural exclusiveness, which, one could argue, is the most urgent and explosive issue for us still.

Irving Greenberg, an Orthodox Jewish rabbi and philosopher, says that the tendency of monotheism is to absolutize its singular truth and to shut out others and their truths. It is, he says, a struggle within Judaism from the very beginning, between the universal spirit of God's covenant with every living creature and the in-group, us and them, insiders and outsiders, system.

Jonathan Sacks, Great Britain's chief rabbi, puts it powerfully:

> One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals. It is the belief that those who do not share my faith—or my race or my ideology—do not share my humanity. At best they are second-class citizens. At worst they forfeit the sanctity of life itself. They are the unsaved, the unbelievers, the infidel, the unredeemed: they stand outside the circle of salvation.

"From this equation," Sacks says, "flowed the Crusades, the Inquisition, the jihads, the pogroms, and ultimately, the Holocaust."

Both Greenberg and Sacks, writing out of the monotheism of Judaism, make an intriguing suggestion: first, that acknowledging and accommodating pluralism, religious and cultural diversity, is the great moral challenge of our age, and second, that the monotheism of the Abrahamic tradition—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim—is inclusive, not exclusive, because no one is outside the perimeters of God's love. God doesn't forget anyone.

Well, if that's true, are there no absolute truths then? Is everything relative? Not at all, Greenberg argues. His proposal is "covenantal pluralism," which affirms God's love of variety and uniqueness. In this covenantal pluralism, we do not filter out the differences and turn everything gray. "We encounter the full intensity of distinctive positions. We hold on to our absolutes: however, we make room for others as well" (*Between Heaven and Earth*, p. 91).

Hold onto your absolutes, he advises, but in a pluralistic fashion that allows space for others to hold tightly to their absolutes.

It is the only ultimately hopeful way to envision a world actually at peace and, these two Jewish theologians argue compellingly, it is our most precious truth. God's love and mercy is for all. Of course we treasure our family, our faith, our heritage, our creeds, our absolutes. But we must stop translating that into a triumphant exclusivism that condemns, excludes others, because God has not.

At a level deep in our hearts, I think we can understand this, even if our intellects don't want to go along. Parents know, Greenberg points out, because he is one. "What parent will not welcome the opportunity to validate this deepest religious truth: I love each of my children as my favorite and my love is not exhausted by that fact?" (p. 197).

Our basic story: In God's name, for God's sake, God's people banish and exclude others and then God turns the table on them, God goes after those others, hears the baby crying, blesses them, sends them on their way to become part of God's wonderful and mysterious plan for a diverse and redeemed creation.

No one is forgotten. There is a moral imperative here. No child anywhere is forgettable. No child in Africa, sick, starving; no child in Iraq; no child in Cabrini-Green, alone all day on the streets or in a hot empty apartment mindlessly watching television; no child of privilege, bored, hustled to and from summer camp with nothing much else to do—no child is forgettable. In our modest little community garden on Chicago Avenue, the children come —a few, more by the week. They come because there are kind adults there who tell them they matter. One of them I will not forget. Her name is Raneesha. She is eight years old. She's away just now, visiting relatives in Mississippi. She told one of our wonderful young adults that she has nine brothers, and one of them is in prison for murder. Someone showed her my plot and told her I was the minister of the church that was doing all this. So Raneesha adopted me, made a little circle of stones around my name plate, and said she'd watch over my garden. I like that thought: Raneesha won't forget us and I won't forget her.

Paul Tillich was one of the most important thinkers of the last century. He was a complex and rigorous scholar of the human condition. He said once that what we fear most, more than death itself, is being forgotten; that it is one of the most deeply disturbing thoughts any of us ever has. It is one of the most powerful threats experienced by prisoners of war, held in solitary confinement for years—even more than physical pain and torture—that they will be forgotten.

“Will you forget me forever?” the psalmist asked.

“The simple word ‘forget,’” Tillich said, “can plunge us into the deepest riddle of life and death, time and eternity” (*The Eternal Now*, p. 26).

But Tillich was not only a profound philosopher, but also a Christian.

The good news, he said, with eloquent simplicity, is that we are known eternally. “God is not only the beginning from which we came. He is also the end to which we go.”

“I will trust your steadfast love,” the psalmist answered.

God heard that abandoned baby crying in the wilderness. God did not banish or forget, and God will not forget you.

One time Jesus’ disciples were worrying about what was to become of them. Opposition to him—and them—was emerging wherever they went; powerful forces were converging. They well knew how the Romans dealt with people like them. They saw the crosses on prominent hills in Jerusalem, beside the roads, in the village squares.

And Jesus said the most remarkable thing. Did you hear it?

> Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father. And even the hairs of your head are numbered. So do not be afraid.

From the dim recesses of our history, in one of our oldest family stories, comes the most amazing idea.

> God heard a baby cry in the wilderness.
> God does not forget anyone.
> God’s Son, Jesus Christ, centuries later reminded his friends—and us—that God does not overlook or forget anyone, ever.

As Jesus died, the one beside him said, “Master, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And Jesus said, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

There is a lovely little refrain written for the Taizécommunity in France. Sing it along with the choir.

> “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.”

He does. He will. Forever.

Thanks be to God.